SUPPORTING SAFE ROUTES TO SCHOOL THROUGH SMART SCHOOL SITING

Safe Routes PARTNERSHIP
Active Paths for Equity & Health

COLORADO
Department of Transportation

Colorado Safe Routes to School

Prepared for the Colorado Department of Transportation

WHY SCHOOL SITING MATTERS

School siting can affect a wide range of matters, including students' proximity to school, access to community resources, protection from environmental dangers, composition and integration of the student body, and design features that can support walking and bicycling.

For students to be able to walk or bike to school, or to use recreational facilities outside of school hours, it is essential that schools be located relatively near to where students live. Over the past fifty years, schools around the country have increasingly been built on the outskirts of communities, too far from children's homes for walking or biking to be practical. In 1969, 45 percent of elementary school children lived a mile or less from school, and almost 90 percent of those children walked or biked to school. Decades later, only 24 percent lived within a mile of school.[1,2] Distance from school is often the biggest barrier to walking to school.[3]

School siting issues also matter for additional reasons. Schools that are located near where students live reduce air pollution in the community and may also reduce exposure of students to idling vehicles, which can improve asthma and lung disease outcomes. Smart school siting means that students spend less time sitting in school buses and private vehicles. Lesser distances also support higher levels of family involvement in school activities, whether volunteering in the classroom or participating in PTA meetings or school events.

School siting should also ensure that air quality hazards and other environmental dangers are minimized for students. This means avoiding sites that pose dangers to students, such as those that are near freeways, near industries that see heavy truck traffic, in locations that require crossing wide streets, or on or near sites that may be polluted with toxic contaminants.

WHAT IS SCHOOL SITING?

School siting is a shorthand for the bundle of decisions that affect where schools end up located. School siting decisions include considerations about where to build new schools, which existing schools will be closed, whether to renovate a school or start over, as well as decisions about the design and orientation of a school on a site.

SMART SCHOOL SITING: SCHOOL DISTRICT, LOCAL GOVERNMENT, AND STATE DECISIONS

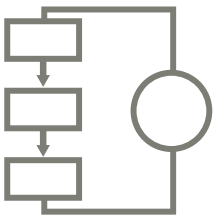
School siting primarily involves decisions by local school districts that affect where schools are located and how they are designed. School siting is also affected by municipal decisions about where to locate new housing and where to encourage growth and investment in relation to school campuses. State policies often have some influence on school siting decisions, providing overarching guidance and constraint.

What can each decision-making layer do to ensure smart school siting?

Three Ways to Ensure Smart School Siting

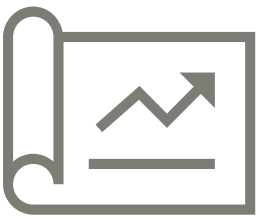
School Districts

Adopt smart school siting policies that address school location and site design.



Local Governments

Establish strong systems for ongoing communication and collaboration with school districts.



State Policy

Set up permanent policy structures that support smart school siting and Safe Routes to School.

Photo: Dave Cowan

I. School Districts

Districts can adopt smart school siting policies that ensure they consider overall land use patterns, walkability and proximity of schools to residences, and areas that pose hazards for students' health and well-being when evaluating new school sites, considering school closures, and thinking about consolidation. Policies can address not only siting, but also the design of school sites, which can also affect students' physical activity. Healthy school design includes outdoor space for play and physical activity and provides safe and convenient entrances for students, families, and teachers walking and bicycling.

ChangeLab Solutions has a set of six inter-related model school board policies that spell out best practices for district policies and decision-making on school siting.[4] The model policies can be integrated into existing facilities and other board policy areas that advance smart school siting, and address the following topics:

- School Siting Overview Policy
- Long-Term Coordinated Planning
- Procedures for School Site Planning
- Considerations for School Siting Determinations
- Site Design
- General Guidelines for Attendance Zones & Assignment Policies

Model policies formatted for use in Colorado can be found here.

II. Local Governments

Local governments generally have no direct control over school siting decisions. But local governments have a responsibility to provide street and utility access to school sites, ensure overall street safety, provide bicycle and pedestrian networks that address school travel, consider and regulate beneficial and harmful land uses near schools, and incorporate schools into long term planning.

One of the most important things that a local government can do is to establish a strong partnership and systems for ongoing communication and collaboration with local school district(s). Developing trust and a sense of collaboration mean that the concerns, priorities, and limitations of local government can be built into siting decisions from the beginning.

From a policy standpoint, local governments support smart school siting and safe active travel to school by:

- Zoning and incentivizing dense housing development around existing developed areas, rather than sprawling residential developments that are costly to provide services to.
- Colocating parks, libraries, and other civic areas with existing and planned schools.
- Developing and regularly updating an active transportation plan (or bicycle and pedestrian plans) to determine how the locality will systematically move toward safe networks for walking and bicycling, especially from residences to schools and other key destinations.
- Adopting a Safe Routes to School resolution that commits the locality to support Safe Routes to School, whether by coordinating around Walk and Bike to School Days, funding a coordinator, prioritizing school zones for infrastructure improvements, or more.
- Adopting a Complete Streets policy that commits the locality to ensuring that new streets and street renovations lead to streets that are safe for walking, biking, driving, and transit.


Photo: Andrea Orest

III. State Policy

State policy can support smart school siting in a variety of ways. State laws, regulations, and agency policies can:

- Support Safe Routes to School by setting up permanent state policy structures and programs that support provision of funding and assistance to local Safe Routes to School programs, infrastructure improvements, and policies.
- Avoid negative state requirements, guidelines, or incentives for school siting: e.g., no minimum acreage requirements that necessitate excessively large school sites; no funding rules that preference new construction over renovation.
- Institute positive requirements, guidelines, and incentives that encourage smart school siting:
  - Support proximity of school sites to student residential origins
  - Support colocation of school sites with parks, libraries, and other civic spaces
  - Support school sites that are well integrated into existing and planned walking and bicycling networks
  - Require sufficient outdoor play space
  - Limit state financial support for excessively large or sprawling sites
  - Consider dangers to students, such as exposure to site contaminants, traffic hazards, air pollution, etc.
  - Support collaborative planning between local jurisdictions and school districts

References

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3. Martin S, Carlson S. Barriers to children walking to or from school - United States, 2004. Journal of the American Medical Association, reprinted in MMWR, https://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/preview/mmwrhtml/mm5438a2.htm.
4. https://www.changelabsolutions.org/product/smart-school-siting.